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Subjects: [Electronic commerce](#), [Price variance](#), [Customer services](#)  
Author(s): [Elizabeth Weise](#)  
Document types: News  
Section: [LIFE](#)  
Publication title: [USA TODAY. McLean, Va.: Apr 21, 1999. pg. 04.D](#)  
Source type: Newspaper  
ISSN/ISBN: 07347456  
ProQuest document ID: 40740206  
Text Word Count: 826  
Document URL: [http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?  
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The ability to do exactly that -- charge different people different prices at the same time based on how good a customer the person is or might become -- is the holy grail of Web marketers, and they say they're "very, very" close.

Say goodbye to one-price-for-all shopping. Say hello to a high-tech cyberbazaar, where sites size you up as soon as you walk through their virtual doors and price items accordingly -- and you have to deploy your own arsenal of tricks to get the best deal possible.

Her company is helping wine seller Virtual Vineyards ([www.virtualvin.com](http://www.virtualvin.com)) create a program that watches customers poke around awhile, and then, if they don't seem inclined to pull out the old Visa card, might pipe up with something like "Gee, we haven't gotten you to buy anything yet. How about free shipping?" (Eileen) Gittins says.

**Full Text** (826 words)*Copyright USA Today Information Network Apr 21, 1999*

Tech Extra; WEDNESDAY: INFORMATION, THE INTERNET AND ENTERTAINMENT

How would you feel if the next time you bought clothes, the person ahead of you in line paid \$10 less for exactly the same pair of slacks? Or, if at the door of the liquor store, the clerk handed a 15%-off coupon to the guy who came

in right after you?

The ability to do exactly that – charge different people different prices at the same time based on how good a customer the person is or might become – is the holy grail of Web marketers, and they say they're "very, very" close.

Say goodbye to one-price-for-all shopping. Say hello to a high-tech cyberbazaar, where sites size you up as soon as you walk through their virtual doors and price items accordingly – and you have to deploy your own arsenal of tricks to get the best deal possible.

"The whole notion of pricing being elastic is inevitable," says Eileen Gittins, CEO of Personify of San Francisco.

Her company is helping wine seller Virtual Vineyards ([www.virtualvin.com](http://www.virtualvin.com)) create a program that watches customers poke around awhile, and then, if they don't seem inclined to pull out the old Visa card, might pipe up with something like "Gee, we haven't gotten you to buy anything yet. How about free shipping?" Gittins says.

In this world, price is fluid and dynamic. "It's going to be predicated on my supply, who you are, how much business you do, what the lifetime value is to my company," she says.

It's all made possible by a technique called "data mining." Companies such as Personify help sites sift through the millions of pieces of information collected about visitors and use the information to try to turn those visitors into customers.

Right now, that's mostly done by personalizing the pages a visitor sees. In the future, it's likely to include differential pricing based on who that visitor is – or who the Web site guesses he or she is.

Not everyone sees this kind of one-to-one selling – and pricing – as a good thing. "The scary part is the combination of invasion of privacy and determining the price based on some information you've unknowingly given them," says Margot Saunders of the National Consumer Law Center in Washington, D.C.

"This is dangerous territory sites are treading," says Nick Donatiello of research firm Odyssey in San Francisco, because Americans are big on fairness. Eventually, norms about what constitutes fair will change, but at first, he says, "it's going to get ugly."

Kate Delhagen, an analyst with the Gartner Group in Stamford, Conn., expects lawsuits as consumers realize information collected about them is used to treat them differently, sometimes to their detriment.

However much it feels unfair to offer different people different prices for the same item, is it legal?

"Bottom line, yes," says David Medine, associate director for financial practices with the Federal Trade Commission.

The precedent was set in a case that got a lot of press when it was filed in 1996 and less when it ended. New York lawyer Howard Gotbetter was fined \$5,000 for suing Victoria's Secret for what he termed "racketeering" because the company's catalogs offered different discounts to new and repeat customers.

The judge threw the case out, saying it displayed a "flagrant lack of merit."

Price is eminently fluid in the real world, more than most of us realize, partially because we're not always privy to the ways that the price we're being offered is affected by who we are.

Shopping for a car is an endless bargaining session, based in no small part on the sizing-up by the dealer when we come through the door.

Magazines offer different subscription prices to different segments of their readers.

Catalog merchants always ask for the customer number on the back so they know what price category to assign when you call.

Saunders says her husband automatically gets a 20% discount from their dry cleaner "because he has a lot of dirty clothes."

In many ways, the Internet has put customers on an equal footing with retailers for the first time, through access to information and the ability to comparison-shop on a level not possible until now, says Donna Hoffman, a professor at Vanderbilt University who researches e-commerce.

The problem, Saunders says, is that only half of U.S. homes contain computers, so a large chunk of the population will be out of the loop for the potential bargains.

Even those on line are in for an interesting period of dueling information protocols, with shoppers using their own tricks to fake out Web sites' data-mining algorithms. Once consumers realize what's happening to them, Delhagen says, "they'll realize they can get a better deal if they exhibit certain behaviors."

The FTC's Medine agrees. "One response might be to get a friend to shop for the same product and see which of you gets the better price."

**[Illustration]**

GRAPHIC, B/W, Sam Ward, USA TODAY (Illustration)

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